

There are a few avenues open for discussion of **FELIX MENDELSSOHN**'s Quintet Op. 87 for 2 violins, 2 violas, and cello. It has an exceptionally exuberant first violin part; it has four movements; it is in Bb major; it bears a reasonably close formal resemblance to his string quartet Op. 44 No. 1; it was written in 1845. These things are good to know. But it is the bicentennial of Mendelssohn's birth; why pour cold water on the works? Perhaps it is best to leave some of the description to the man himself. He did not write a program for this piece, but he did give a wonderfully curious description of listening itself — of the relation between music and text, and his consequent aesthetic stance — in a letter that has rightly become famous, and which creates as rich a context as any fact or investigation. It was written to his student Marc André Souchay in 1842, as an objection to the addition of words to his “songs without words”:

So much is spoken about music and so little is said. For my part I do not believe that words suffice for such a task, and if they did I would no longer make any music. People usually complain that music is too many-sided in its meanings; what they should think when they hear it is so ambiguous, whereas everyone understands words. For me, it is precisely the opposite, not only with entire speeches, but with individual words. They too seem so ambiguous, so vague, so subject to misunderstanding when compared with true music, which fills the soul with a thousand better things than words. The thoughts that are expressed to me by the music I love are not too indefinite to put into words, but, on the contrary, too definite. And I find every effort to express such thoughts legitimate, but altogether inadequate...

So let it be, for now, with Mendelssohn. The history of Mendelssohn's life, death, and subsequent reception are full of musical, political, literary, and even terrifying words; here is a work from a man who understood other possibilities for understanding, and brought them into the world to be heard in all of their spectacular specificity.



In 1986, **CHEN YI** became the first woman to receive a master's degree in composition in China when she presented a concert of her orchestral works in Beijing. Born in 1953 in Guangzhou into a family of doctors with strong interests in classical music, she started studying violin and piano at age three. During China's cultural revolution in the late 1960's, Chen was sent into the countryside to work on a farm for two years. She brought her violin with her and practiced her fingering by playing revolutionary songs, Paganini's capriccios and cadenzas. Later, pursuing her DMA degree at Columbia University, she studied composition with Professor Chou Wen-chung, an associate of Edgard Varèse, who defined music as “organized sound.” Chen Yi transcends cultural and musical boundaries, composing music that blends the themes and sounds of her native China with the techniques of Western classical music. Recipient of the prestigious Charles Ives Living Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and numerous other awards and commissions, she has served as Distinguished Professor in Music Composition at the Conservatory of the University of Missouri-Kansas City since 1998. Chen also served on the composition faculty of Peabody Conservatory at The Johns Hopkins University and as Composer-in-Residence with the Women's Philharmonic and Chanticleer, supported by Meet the Composer's New Residencies Program.



The Kreutzer Sonata is literally one of the most storied works in the entire classical repertoire. Perhaps it had something of a reputation before Leo Tolstoy's insanely misogynistic and wildly popular novella entitled “The Kreutzer Sonata,” but since Tolstoy's literary canonization of it, its name has been cemented in popular concert lore. Why this piece came to Tolstoy's attention is not absolutely clear. But it is clear enough that, to begin with, **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN** had a (deserved) reputation as an unkempt disturber of musical propriety. This certainly contributed to the possibility of listeners hearing dangerousness in it, and gave Tolstoy traction for his story's lines.

Perhaps it is the sheer excessiveness of it: it is too long, too fast, too obsessive, too much piano, and too much violin. Historically speaking, it is relevant to note that what is now known as the “violin

sonata” was until Brahms’ time called a “sonata for piano and violin” — indicating, importantly, that the violin was necessary but mostly secondary. An amateur lady, who had time at home to practice, would play piano, and a man, who must have used his time to work rather than to practice, would play the violin part as a sort of frosting. But the Kreutzer sonata, more even than Beethoven’s previous works for piano and violin, couldn’t be forced into that mold. The violin part requires professional, or at least serious, attention, and the piano part is far from ladylike. It is perhaps this element — a kind of impropriety, even if merely musical - which lit a fire in Tolstoy’s mind.

The Kreutzer Sonata gives no rest. The first movement, marked Presto after its slow introduction, is overflowing with force, to which Tolstoy’s (admittedly deranged) narrator responds: “How can that first presto be played in a drawing-room among ladies in low-necked dresses?” Following this, there is no real ‘slow’ movement — or at least no seriously reflective one. The theme of the second movement is simple and lilting enough (if a little bit tense), but the variations upon it are willfully strange. The first and second variations, with their incessant repetitions in the violin, must surely be some of the most annoying excellent music in the world. The last movement is Presto again.

The arrangement for today’s concert dates from soon after the work was composed; its author is unknown. The expansion of this extraordinary piece into a quintet is quite apt: the piece itself has grown into something more than the sum of its parts. One plus one may equal five in this case. It seems to work nicely.

- Tim Summers